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Time to Learn Spanish?

Chester Smolski

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URBAN DEEDS/ **Chester Smolski**

Pro Bus News

2-14-94

Time to learn Spanish?

Americans don't take well to foreign languages.

When living and traveling in as large a country as ours — with so many people who speak English — why bother to learn a foreign language? And now that English has generally replaced French as the language of the world, one can question the necessity of becoming conversant in a different tongue when English is understood in most countries of the world.

But there is a change taking place in the nation that should cause us to question this reliance on English. The change is in the increasing numbers of new people coming into the United States who continue to speak in their own languages.

In the first decade of this century when the second largest number of immigrants came to these shores — now exceeded by the nine million, both legal and illegal, who came in the 1980s — the emphasis was on becoming "Americanized."

Immigrants were demeaned and shunned and "greenhorn" was a derisive term that newcomers sought to overcome by learning English.

Newcomers still face hardships today, but they have government policy on their side. Government now encourages ethnicity and strives to have immigrants retain their culture.

This new effort to encourage ethnicity means that newcomers might be less reluctant to drop their old languages completely as they learn the new one, something not done in the early days.

In the 1990 census, 94 languages were identified as spoken in Rhode Island; the highest percentage increase in population was Hispanic.

The 22.4 million Hispanics counted in the 1990 census made up nine percent of the U.S. population, up from 6.4 percent in 1980. With the rate of Hispanic growth currently five times the national average, Hispanics will be the largest minority in 15 years and will make up 21 percent of the country's population in the middle of the next century.

Rhode Island led

the nation in the percentage increase of Hispanics from 1980 to 1990, at 132 percent.

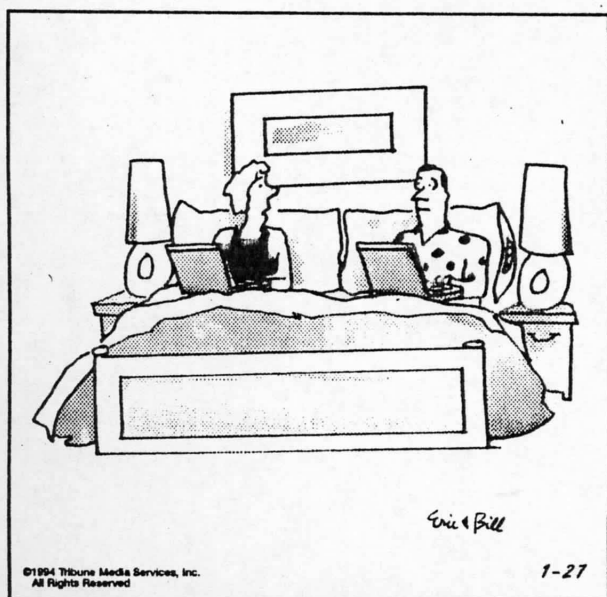
The most obvious aspect of a culture is its language and it is here that the impact of the Hispanic immigration is felt. Of the 32 million Americans five years old and older who speak a language other than English at home, 17.3 million, or 54 percent, use Spanish; an increase from 11.1 million, or 48 percent, in 1980. Today, after English, Spanish is the most common language in 39 states.

So should we make a greater attempt to learn another language? Given the new numbers obtained from the 1990 census and the projections of what our population will look like, I tell my students that Spanish will be the foreign language of the future and that they will be well advised to move in that direction.

With new economic ties to Latin America through the North American Free Trade Agreement; with population growth continuing unabated from many of the third world Hispanic nations that look to the United States for opportunities; and with a growth rate currently exceeding 50 percent in this country, Hispanics represent the population wave of the future. Wouldn't this be a good time to consider learning the language?

Chester Smolski is professor of geography and director of urban studies at Rhode Island College. His column appears monthly.

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"What's happened to us, Richard? Our laptops never talk to one another anymore."